

This land is your land

Land swap with military in roadless Stony Creek Valley needs scrutiny

Ad Crable

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The 41,000-acre forested land in Lebanon and Dauphin counties includes the state's first rail-trail and the first state-designated Scenic River.

It holds the famed Appalachian Trail, deer, bears, bobcats, coyotes, turkeys, rattlesnakes, woodland songbirds that need unfragmented forest and the endangered eastern woodrat.

Not overly much has been written since the Pennsylvania National Guard at Fort Indiantown Gap announced in May a proposal to obtain 1,800 acres of Game Lands 211 that sportsmen in the state and around the nation paid for in the 1940s to preserve.

Not reported, until now, is that the military first requested 8,000 acres, but was shot down. That proposal would have cut the geographic heart out of the game lands wilderness, dissecting it into two pieces.

The land coveted by the National Guard lies on the steep north flank of Second Mountain and extends down almost to Stony Creek, a prized hike-in-only trout stream.

The military is offering to buy an 1,800-acre strip of bottomland surrounding the DeHart Dam already open to public hunting and hiking on the north edge of the game lands from the Harrisburg Water Authority to swap for the property it wants.

That would allow Game Lands 211 and nearby Game Lands 210 to meet, creating the state's largest game lands at 56,500 acres.

And the former game lands would continue to be made available to hunters and hikers, though Gap officials acknowledge the eastern end of the property could be closed during training.

The military says it needs the woodland as a safety buffer for future firing ranges and training along the 17,000-acre installation's northern border.

Errant or ricocheting shells from tanks and machine guns have periodically fallen into the game lands in the past, as has World War II ordnance found by hunters.

Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver, a Pennsylvania National Guard spokesman, says the only incidents lately have involved non-explosive parachute flares.

However, Scott Bills, the Game Commission's land management supervisor for the area, says twice in the last year or so he has been patrolling on the rail-trail and had shells whistle overhead and crash through branches.

And he says unexploded ordnance has been found a couple times in the last couple years and demolition teams had to be sent into the game lands to explode it.

Homeland security has been invoked by the military in their quest, as well as the future stability of Fort Indiantown Gap Lebanon County's largest employer in these base-closing times.

The facility trains troops for frontline duty in Iraq and is scheduled to be one of only six sites around the country to test the Stryker, the Army's newest battle vehicle, and the troops to man them.

In its pitch, the military says it will expand recreational opportunities by adding driving access points closer to the game lands, build deer-hunting platforms for handicapped and open some of the military installation's 17,000 acres to trappers.

Except for a single-strand wire demarcating a new boundary line, the 1,800 acres under Pennsylvania National Guard ownership would not change in appearance or use from what it is now, says Cleaver.

The northern slope of the mountain will look like it does now, he says, and points out that informal surveys show few hunters or hikers use the steep mountainside.

The boundary line for an expanded Gap would end 165 feet short of the banks of Stony Creek.

How critical is the 1,800 acres to the mission of Fort Indiantown Gap, the largest National Guard facility in the nation, serving 20,000 Guardsmen?

Very critical, Cleaver says. This is not something we take lightly ... we've exhausted our other opportunities.

And the Game Commission's Bills says the water authority property has more potential for wildlife habitat.

Still, the land exchange has its detractors.

Some don't like the idea of giving up game lands paid for with hunters hard-earned money for land already open for public recreation.

Some, remembering the long fight in the 1970s to save Stony Creek from becoming a utility pumped storage reservoir, the hills lanced with power lines, warn that letting the military get their foot in the door of the beloved game lands will only open the way for more annexation down the road.

The 8,000 acres originally floated by the military may give credence to their anxiety.

My biggest concern, frankly, is this is potentially the camel's nose under the tent, says noted nature writer Scott Weidensaul.

This is an absolutely terrible precedent. It's one of the most important pieces of state property we have.

And what if the Pa. Game Commission says no?

Eminent domain has never been on the drawing board and is not the spirit of the Pennsylvania National Guard, Cleaver declares.

It's no build and go somewhere else, or acquire the land.

However, the Game Commission's Bills, who has been involved in the negotiations, says, At one time they did mention some of the land could be condemned because of unexploded ordnance. That kind of put us on our heels.

Though the Game Commission isn't saying much, it appears the agency's brass is willing to go along with the swap.

When it comes to what the Gap does and what the Pennsylvania Game Commission does, the U.S. military is far more important as far as I'm concerned, says Stephen Mohr, a PGC commissioner from Bainbridge.

Another wrinkle possibly affecting the swap is that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has to sign off on any exchange of game lands, as federal Pittman-Robertson Act funds were used in the purchase. An environmental impact study apparently needs to be done by USFWS.

Some think the Scenic River designation by the state carries protection, but it does not. The program mainly recommends guidelines for managing noted waterways, but the designation itself offers no legal safeguards.

Though it appears the PGC may be inclined to go along with the swap, some within the agency want the Gap to ante up more than a one-acre-for-one-acre deal. Historically, the Game Commission requires better than a 1-to-1 ratio for swaps.

The PGC also is studying which segment of the Harrisburg Water Authority's 7,000-8,000 acres would be most advantageous.

The Pennsylvania National Guard will hold a public meeting on the proposal from 6 to 8 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 30, at the Ft. Indiantown Gap Community Club. For more information, call 861-8330.

In the meantime, sportsmen, the Pennsylvania Game Commission and all Pennsylvanians who value wild places and wildlife should take a long, inquiring look at this proposal.